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### A howl over coyotes

When wild neighbors adapt to suburban life, communities must find ways to cope.

**TAMI RYAN**

The coyote: A new neighbor that's not welcome in the 'burbs. © Stephen J. Lang

Sometimes newcomers to a neighborhood can be a little too nosy for comfort. In Franklin, a man reported that while cutting his lawn on three different occasions, a new neighbor watched him intently from the edge of a woodlot, never coming near, but refusing to leave.

I started to piece together a possible explanation. The owner let the grass in his yard grow fairly tall between mowings. The grassy area near a woodlot likely held plenty of field mice and meadow voles. The rodents likely retreated toward the woods when they heard the mower approaching. And the "neighbor" -- a coyote -- learned that the sound of the mower would deliver an easy meal.

A Mequon woman called because her neighbors saw a prowler on her back deck. The woman feared letting her children or dog outside. This particular intruder became accustomed to finding full food dishes and water dishes on back porches. Spilt seed from bird feeders around the deck attracted rodents, which in turn drew the attention of the culprit -- a coyote.

Like deer, raccoons, and geese, coyotes are adaptable animals whose range has expanded throughout North America. Coyotes are especially wary of humans in places where they are hunted or trapped. However, in urban and suburban areas where they are not pursued as game animals, the coyotes' natural fear of humans decreases. When coyotes are seen in a neighborhood, many people express concern for the safety of children and pets. Coyotes will prey on house cats and attack dogs. Their fears are not unfounded: Although attacks are rare, coyotes have seriously injured small children in other states. This has not occurred in Wisconsin.

### In the news and the neighborhood

Coyotes live in every Wisconsin county, with a statewide population estimated at 17,000-20,000. Surveys and sightings reported by DNR staff and the public indicate the coyote population is stable in most areas of the state, and increasing in the southern and western portions.

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are members of the dog family Canidae, and are often described as having a "German shepherd-like" appearance. They have long, thin legs, a tapered muzzle, and large, pointed ears. Their fur ranges in color from a dull yellow to gray with the throat and belly area light gray or white. An adult male coyote will measure about four feet long, including its long, black-tipped, bushy tail, and can weigh between 25 and 42 pounds. Females are smaller in size and weight.

More frequent reports of coyote sightings in recent years can be attributed to expanding development into rural areas and to media coverage of coyote-related incidents.

For instance in southeast Wisconsin, we've had alleged cases of coyotes killing dogs in Oak Creek, Franklin and Glendale, while the pets surely died, we couldn't substantiate if the pets were killed by coyotes, by other domestic animals, feral dogs, wolf-dog hybrids, or from other causes. In all cases the dogs were small breeds, the dogs were not leashed, they were pets accompanied by their owners and deaths occurred between dusk and dawn.

Although coyotes are primarily nocturnal, it's not uncommon to observe them during the day. As a survival instinct, coyotes became nocturnal when Wisconsin settlers pursued them as game.

We may be seeing more urban coyotes during daylight because they are no longer hunted and trapped, and are reverting to their pre-settlement behavior. Coyote sightings often increase in the winter because the animals travel greater distances in search of food, increasing the likelihood of being seen.

Coyotes are typically not aggressive toward humans and are generally fearful of them. In areas of southeastern Wisconsin, as in other areas where coyotes are not hunted or trapped due to local ordinances, this fear is reduced. As a result, coyotes may not flee immediately upon observing humans.

Coyotes prefer woodland edges and brushy areas that provide adequate cover; however, they readily use farm fields, parkways, riverways, parks and other areas with natural vegetation in city and residential developments. Coyotes routinely travel a territory, which may include your back yard. Coyote pups are born in the spring, and the nursing females and their young need a lot of food. By late summer, the pups have learned to hunt for themselves, but they are searching for food at the same time of year people enjoy backyard barbecues and picnics.

These versatile predators and scavengers feed primarily on rabbits, small rodents and animal carcasses, but will also eat birds, fish, amphibians, reptiles, and a variety of fruits, vegetables, grains and other plants. White-tailed deer carcasses are a principal food source for the coyote in Wisconsin. Coyotes do not commonly prey upon deer, although they are capable of taking fawns and weakened adults.

As with any predator-prey relationship, coyotes help keep their prey populations healthy and in balance with the environment. When coyotes consume animal carcasses, they help prevent the spread of disease within wildlife populations. In agricultural areas, coyotes prey on rodents that damage crops.

When the coyote's natural food is plentiful it seldom preys upon domestic animals -- but pet cats and rabbits are no match for a hungry coyote. Coyotes are territorial; they may perceive domestic dogs as a threat, triggering a response to defend home turf, food sources, den sites and offspring. Pet owners should avoid leaving their pets outside unattended at night when coyotes are most active. Also, keep your pets' vaccinations up to date. Coyotes carry internal and external parasites and are susceptible to an assortment of diseases including rabies, canine parvovirus and canine distemper.

## **Controlling coyotes in communities**

To keep coyote populations in check, Wisconsin maintains a year-round firearm season and specified trapping season. On private property landowners, occupants and family members can hunt or trap coyotes without a license to remove nuisance animals at any time except the 24 hours preceding the gun deer opener or in areas designated as "closed to coyote hunting during the gun deer season."

In cities, controlling coyotes is another matter altogether. With trapping and hunting often prohibited within the city limits of many communities, residents must use nonlethal means of discouraging coyotes: making loud noises, throwing rocks, or spraying them with a garden hose. Although the response may not be immediate, eventually the coyotes will flee.

The sight of coyotes roaming suburbia does perk up interest in a hurry. Several towns and villages in our southeast corner have found reason to put coyote management on the public agenda:

In the winter of 1996-97, a coyote allegedly killed a poodle in the south Milwaukee County community of Oak Creek. Municipal administrators considered a program to shoot "problem" coyotes in response to concerns from area dog owners. DNR wildlife managers and a conservation warden met with community leaders to discuss coyote biology and management. A shooting program was authorized, then abandoned due to public opposition. No coyotes were shot.

The Village of Wind Point in Racine County was issued permits in the winters of 1995 & 1996 to trap nuisance coyotes. A pet owner whose dog was subsequently caught in a permitted snare spearheaded public opposition, and trapping did not continue in 1997. Since then, state law has allowed coyote trapping without the need for a permit.

I have made presentations to town residents, village boards and common councils in Fox Point, Franklin, Mequon, Caledonia and River Hills. A common outcome of the meetings is a concerted community effort to use nonlethal ways to dissuade coyotes from staying on urban lots. Most communities are finding ways to live with their wild neighbors.

Educating the community about coyote habits is key to understanding their behavior and preventing problems. A four-page DNR fact sheet "The Coyote" (publication WM-148 86) can be duplicated and distributed. Order a copy from the DNR Bureau of Wildlife Management, P.O. Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707.

Other recommended books about coyote habits include *Mammals of Wisconsin* by H.H.T. Jackson; *Coyotes: Biology, Behavior, and Management* by M. Bekoff; *Wild Mammals of North America – Biology, Management, Economics* by J.S. Chapman and G.A. Feldhamer; *The Wild Canids – Their Systematics, Behavioral Ecology and Evolution* by M.W. Fox; and *Furbearing Animals of North America* by L.L. Rue.

Coyote sightings should become less frequent, though they likely won't stop altogether: Occasional sightings will continue because coyotes keep learning new ways to survive as a part of the urban wildlife community. These intelligent animals, like their human neighbors, adapted to life in the suburbs.

**TAMI RYAN** is the DNR's wildlife biologist stationed in Milwaukee.

## Preventing coyote problems

If you are concerned about coyotes on your property or in your neighborhood, follow these tips:

**Do not feed coyotes!** Problems occur when people begin feeding coyotes, either deliberately or inadvertently. Garbage should be stored in secure containers. Do not put meat scraps in compost piles.

**Remove bird feeders and outside pet food containers.** Coyotes will prey upon small mammals attracted to birdseed and pet food.

**Don't allow pets to run free and keep a watchful eye on them.** Walk dogs on a leash, especially at night.

**Provide secure shelters for poultry, rabbits, or other outside pets.**

**Clear wood piles, brush piles and other potential cover for coyotes.**

**Don't leave small children outside unattended.**

**Reinforce the coyotes' natural fear of humans** by turning on outside lights, making loud noises, throwing rocks and so forth. Be aggressive in your actions! Although the response may not be immediate, eventually the coyotes will flee.

**Consider fencing your yard.** Use a minimum height of 6 feet and bury the bottom at least six inches below ground level. Slant the top of the fence away from the enclosed area to prevent them from getting over the top.

**Encourage your neighbors** to follow the same advice.